

Timeline and Characteristics of British Literature

Old English/Anglo-Saxon Period

Years 499-1066

Content:

- strong belief in fate
- juxtaposition of church and the pagan world
- admiration of heroic warriors who prevail in battle
- express religious faith and give moral instruction through literature

Style/Genres:

- oral tradition of literature
- poetry dominant
- unique verse form
 - caesura
 - alliteration
 - repetition
 - four-beat rhythm

Effect:

- Christianity helps literacy to spread
- introduces Roman alphabet to Britain
- oral tradition helps unite diverse peoples and their myths

Historical Context:

- life centered around ancestral tribes or clans that rule themselves
- at first the people were warriors from invading outlying areas:
Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Danes
- later they were agricultural

A Sampling of Key Literature and Authors:

- Beowulf
- The Venerable Bede
- Exeter Book

The Norman Conquest ended this period. The Bayeux Tapestry, a 20 inch by 23 foot-long embroidered cloth depicting scenes commemorating the *Battle of Hastings* in 1066, was probably commissioned ca 1070 to tell the story of William the Conqueror and Harold, Earl of Wessex, the men who led the Norman and Saxon armies in 1066. William's defeat of Harold at the *Battle of Hastings* ensured success of the Norman invasion of England.

The Middle English Period (Medieval Period)

Years 1066-1485 (roughly)

Content:

- plays that instruct the illiterate masses in morals and religion
- chivalric code of honor/romances
- religious devotion

Style/Genres:

- oral tradition continues
- folk ballads
- mystery and miracle plays
- morality plays
- tock epithets
- kennings
- frame stories
- moral tales

Effect:

- church instructs its people through the morality and miracle plays
- an illiterate population is able to hear and see the literature

Historical Context:

- Crusades bring the development of a money economy for the first time in Britain
- trading increases dramatically as a result of the Crusades
- William the Conqueror crowned king in 1066
- Henry II crowned king in 1154 bring a judicial system, royal courts, juries and chivalry to Britain

A Sampling of Key Literature and Authors

- Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
- Domesday Book
- L'Morte de Author
- Geoffrey Chaucer

The Renaissance

Years: 1485-1660

The Elizabethan Period: the reign of Elizabeth I, 1558-1603

Jacobean Period: the reign of James I of England 1603-1625

Content:

- world view shifts from religion and after life to one stressing the human life on earth
- popular theme: development of human potential
- popular theme: many aspects of love explored
 - unrequited love
 - constant love
 - timeless love
 - courtly love
 - love subject to change

Style/Genres:

- poetry
 - the sonnet
 - metaphysical poetry
 - elaborate and unexpected metaphors called conceits
- drama
 - written in verse
 - supported by royalty
 - tragedies, comedies, histories

Effect:

- commoners welcomed at some play productions (like ones at the Globe) while conservatives try to close the theater on grounds that they promote brazen behaviors
- not all middle-class embrace the metaphysical poets and their abstract conceits

Historical Context:

- War of the Roses ends in 1485 and political stability arrives
- Printing press helps stabilize English as a language and allows more people to read a variety of literature
- Economy changes from farm-based to one of international trade

A Sampling of Key Literature and Authors

- William Shakespeare
- Thomas Wyatt
- Ben Jonson
- Cavalier Poets
- Metaphysical Poets
- John Donne
- Christopher Marlowe
- Andrew Marvell
- Robert Herrick
- Katherine Phillips

The Neoclassical Period:

Years: 1660-1798

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The Restoration: the reign of Charles II, 1660-1685 (after his restoration to the throne in 1660 following the English Civil War and Cromwell)

Jacobean Period: the reign of James I of England 1603-1625

The Age of Enlightenment (the Eighteenth Century)

Content:

- emphasis on reason and logic
- stresses harmony, stability, wisdom
- Locke: social contract exists between the government and the people. The government governs guaranteeing "natural rights" of life, liberty and property

Style/Genres:

- satire
- poetry
- essay
- letters, diaries, biographies
- novels

Effect:

- emphasis on the individual
- belief that humanity is basically evil
- approach to life: "the world as it should be"

Historical Context:

- 50% of males are functionally literate (a dramatic rise)
- Fenced enclosures of land cause demise of traditional village life
- Factories begin to spring up as industrial revolution begins
- Impoverished masses begin to grow as farming life declines and factories build
- Coffee houses-where educated men spend evenings with literary and political associates

A Sampling of Key Literature and Authors

- Alexander Pope
- Daniel Defoe
- Jonathan Swift
- Samuel Johnson
- John Bunyan
- John Milton

The Romantic Period

Years: 1798-1832

Content:

- human knowledge consists of impressions and ideas formed in the individual's mind
- introduction of Gothic elements and terror/horror stories and novels
- in nature one can find comfort and peace that the man-made urbanized towns and factory environments cannot offer

Style/Genres:

- poetry
 - lyrical ballads

Effect:

- evil attributed to society not to human nature
- human beings are basically good
- movement of protest: a desire for personal freedom
- children seen as hapless victims of poverty and exploitation

Historical Context:

- Napoleon rises to power in France and opposes England militarily and economically
- gas lamps developed
- Tory philosophy that government should NOT interfere with private enterprise
- middle class gains representation in the British parliament
- railroad begins to run

Key Literature and Authors

- Novelists
 - Jane Austen
 - Mary Shelley
- Poets
 - Robert Burns
 - William Blake
 - William Wordsworth
 - Samuel Taylor Coleridge
 - Lord Byron
 - Percy Shelley
 - John Keats

The Victorian Period

Years: 1832-1901

Content:

- conflict between those in power and the common masses of laborers and the poor
- shocking life of sweatshops and urban poor is highlighted in literature to insist on reform
- country versus city life
- sexual discretion (or lack of it)
- strained coincidences
- romantic triangle
- heroines in physical danger
- aristocratic villains
- misdirected letters
- bigamous marriages

Style/Genres:

- novel becomes popular for first time; mass produced for the first time
 - bildungsroman
 - political novel
 - detective novels (Sherlock Holmes)
 - serialized novels (Charles Dickens)
- elegies
- poetry: easier to understand
 - dramatic monologues
- drama: comedies of manners
- magazines offer stories to the masses

Effect:

- literature begins to reach the masses

Historical Context:

- paper becomes cheap; magazines and novels cheap to mass produce
- unprecedented growth of industry and business in Britain
- unparalleled dominance of nations, economies and trade abroad

A Sampling of Key Literature and Authors

- Charles Dickens
- Thomas Hardy
- Rudyard Kipling
- Robert Louis Stevenson
- George Elliot
- Oscar Wilde
- Alfred Lord Tennyson
- Charles Darwin
- Charlotte Bronte
- Robert Browning

The Modern Period

Years: 1901-(subject to debate)

Style/Genres:

- poetry: free verse
- epiphanies begin to appear in literature
- speeches
- memoirs
- novels

Historical Context:

- British Empire loses 1 million soldiers to World War I
- Winston Churchill leads Britain through WWII, and the Germans bomb England directly
- British colonies demand independence

A Sampling of Key Literature and Authors

- James Joyce
- Virginia Woolf
- T.S. Eliot
- Joseph Conrad
- D.H. Lawrence
- Graham Greene
- Dylan Thomas
- George Orwell
- William Butler Yeats
- Bernard Shaw